

DAUGHTER OF HILLOCK AND HEATH

Captured by Barbary pirates. Sold as a concubine. Ransomed back by the king of Denmark.

Too far-fetched to be true? Allow me to introduce you to Gudridur...

Based on a true story, DAUGHTER OF HILLOCK AND HEATH is the tale of the strength and resilience of a remarkable Icelandic woman, Gudridur Simonardottir. Captured in the 1627 Barbary pirate raid on her small island home, she was transported to a foreign land and sold in the slave markets of Algiers to the Ottoman Dey. Hope for survival is futile without tenacity and wit, but are they enough to bring her home again?

The History Behind the Book

In the summer of 1627, corsairs from the north of Africa, sailed a 6000 mile round trip to Iceland. They raided and captured over 400 Icelandic people who were subsequently sold as slaves in Salé and Algiers. Most never made it home. This singular event left an indelible mark on Icelandic culture and the impact of the Barbary corsair raids as whole, produced widespread effects that rippled for centuries.

While the distance the corsairs journeyed to Iceland was uncommon, never before or again attempted, corsairs regularly raided the shorelines throughout the Mediterranean and up along the west coast of England in the 16th and 17th centuries. They sought plunder and also human captives to sell in the slave markets of the Maghreb region. The proliferation of raiding attacks during this time period was such that the inhabitants of the land migrated away from the shores, to the interior (Helgason, 2018, p. 154). As these coastal areas became more heavily fortified and/or denuded of plunder and people, the corsairs ventured further and further abroad. Joshua White, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Virginia agrees, saying, "The growing size and reach of North African corsairing operations in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have been well documented" (2019, p. 98). Commonly called pirates or corsairs, it is more accurate to suggest that they were

as slaves or ransom, benefiting the pirates and their financiers.

The circumstances surrounding this event are multifold and complex. Raiding and the commercial enterprise of the slave market began in the 8th century with the Muslim subjugation of the Iberian peninsula. These raids increased in frequency and scope as the majority of the north African coast fell to the dominion of the Ottoman empire in the 16th century. While the Ottoman Sublime Porte (central government) exerted moderate control of the Maghreb region and used the corsairs as mercenaries in their battles, in reality “the port cities of North Africa existed, for all practical purposes, outside the protective umbrella of Ottoman law and beyond the reach of its agents” (White, 2019, p. 98). However, what control the Sublime Porte did possess ensured that “the number of sources from which enemy infidel captives might legally be obtained in peacetime was, in fact, severely limited. The sultan’s commercial and peace agreements with foreign powers, called ahdnames, contained clauses guaranteeing the recipients’ subjects protection from Ottoman enslavement” (White, 2019, p. 96). At this point in time, Iceland was a Danish possession. Not only did Denmark not have a treaty with the Ottoman’s during this period but it was in the midst of the 30 Years War and at the time of the Icelandic raids had not sent its yearly defence ships to the coast of Iceland, leaving the Icelanders more vulnerable than usual.

Just as the circumstances surrounding the Icelandic raids are complex, so too are the specific causes. The journey to Iceland is one that would have been impossible for Barbary corsairs only a few years earlier, as the galleys, their primary form of sea transport, were inadequate for a long sea voyage. However, the 30 Years War, among other factors, led to an influx of European seamen, looking to escape the war or captured in the Mediterranean, who decided to improve their circumstances through conversion to Islam and throwing in their lot with the Barbaries. In the language of the day this was termed “turned turk.” These Europeans were called renegades and “it is sometimes said that in Algiers the overwhelming majority of the reis were renegades...The Barbary corsairs not only included men of European race, they also practised the European art of naval warfare” (Clark, 1944, p. 26). Detailed historical records, which include a long list of European names amongst the captains and crews of the pirate ships, confirm this to be true. R.C. Davis, one of the leading scholars on this subject, asserts, “Lists of the ra'is from around 1600 indicate that better than half of these corsair captains were of European origin, men who came to hold considerable economic sway in cities like Algiers and Tripoli, that were dependent on piracy for their well-being” (2001, p. 121).

Along with the European sailors came European vessels, and the knowledge of how to build and sail them, including the expertise to navigate in northern waters. This allowed the Barbary pirates to raid further afield. It was one of these Europeans renegades, a Dutchman originally named Jan Janszoon and renamed Murat Reis on his conversion of Islam, that led the raids in Iceland.

The captives of these raids fetched a high price on the slave markets of the Barbary coast. Indeed, the slave trade was so fundamental to the economy of the Maghreb region and so profitable that it became the primary inducement for Barbary pirates.

“Algiers was by far the strongest and most dangerous nest of pirates...their one function was to prey upon commerce, and for this purpose not only the fleet but the whole state was organised. The public finances depended mainly on the state's share of all prizes. The rest, in prescribed proportions, provided the livelihood of the owners, officers, soldiers, and crew. The prisoners, whether for their labour or for their ransoms, were always an important part of the booty” (Clark, 1944, p. 26).

The financial reward was such that many corsair captains lived like kings in Algiers and Salé. Davis says, “Some of their coastal slaving expeditions entered into legend among those living on the north Mediterranean shores, as almost annual events...The take shrank somewhat in the seventeenth century...because many coastal dwellers had simply packed up and fled for good” (2001, p. 90). As these coastal areas around the Mediterranean became depleted and vacant, the corsairs were in need of new hunting grounds.

Westman Islands off the coast of Iceland. Reverend Olafur Egilsson, one of the Icelanders from Heimaey, who was captured in the raids, tells us that on "the 16th of July, which was a Monday, then people saw three ships, early in the morning, off the south coast, and one of them was very huge" (Hriensson & Nichols, 2016, pp. 6-7). These vessels at the time were mistaken for Danish ships but unfortunately that was not the case, they were Barbary corsairs. Unable to sail into the harbour of Heimaey due to the cannon, the pirates anchored elsewhere and rowed to shore before spreading out in three raiding parties. The Reverend wrote in his account of the raids that "the pirates were ashore so suddenly that the people found it hard to escape them. They rushed with violent speed across the island, like hunting hounds, howling like wolves...Only a few of the people who were strongest...managed to avoid capture. I, with my weak group was taken" (Hriensson & Nichols, 2016, p. 9). Over 400 Icelanders were taken in the raids and many others were killed. Those captured were loaded aboard the corsair's vessels and three days after they first appeared to the Westman Islanders, the pirates set sail for the north coast of Africa. According to eyewitness testimony, "after the people came aboard the ship at this time, the pirates did not annoy anyone except me, but behaved well towards them all, and were even kind to the children" (Hriensson & Nichols, 2016, p. 18). This of course was likely less a show of altruism and more of a financial consideration, as healthy captives would fetch a significantly higher price at market than a sickly lot (Clark, 1944, p. 22).

This proved to be true a month later as the corsairs sailed into the harbour of Algiers with their spoils. The consequences of these raids for the Icelanders was severe as they "were separated from each other...and driven through the streets to the marketplace where they were put up for auction as if they were sheep or cattle" (Hriensson & Nichols, 2016, p. 26). Of these Icelanders only a fraction survived and even fewer ever made it back to Iceland. The effect on the captives was immense. Mothers separated from children, often never to see them again, and spouses sold to different masters, their lives would never again be the same. Many perished very quickly under the demands of slave-masters, the exotic diseases, and the unforgiving scorching climate to which they were unaccustomed. Of the nearly 400 Icelanders captured in raids on Iceland and sold in Salé and Algiers, only 70 were alive eight years later (Davis, 2001, p. 110). The corsairs and slave owners not only made a profit through the sale and use of the captives, but further incentive was proved by the rich ransoms they requested from the families and/or countries of their victims. Captives could be ransomed even after having been sold into slavery (Helgason, 2018, p. 182). Unfortunately for the Icelanders, "the timing of the Turkish Raid on Iceland was inconvenient, not only for the captured people, but also for the royal authorities in Denmark and for the corsairs themselves. King Christian IV of Denmark and Iceland had lost his war against the Holy Roman Empire, and the royal coffers were empty (Helgason, 2018, p. 183). Despite the Algerians sending Reverend Egilsson as an emissary to the Danish king, it was nearly a decade before just 34 of the captured Icelanders were ransomed and only 27 of these ever returned to their homeland (Hriensson & Nichols, 2016, p. 91).

Yet, even the Icelanders who had escaped capture did not fully escape the consequences of the Barbary corsair raids. Many had loved ones captured or killed. Men and women whose spouses were taken could not remarry under the religious laws and so lived in a state of limbo. The population was tense and afraid of further attacks and Icelandic children grew up hearing horror stories of the pirates and how they would "get" them if they weren't well-behaved. To this day, the children of Iceland read and learn about the attacks and are taken on school field trips to significant sites related to the raids. The Reverend Olafur Egilsson's first-hand account of the raids, his capture, and his travels were printed and "for 300 years, several dozen (or even hundred) manuscripts of *Ólafur Egilsson's Travels* were to be found on farms all over Iceland. No doubt these will have been read aloud or retold during the kvöldvökur, when the household spent the dark winter evenings together in the baðstofa, doing their needlework and handicrafts, as someone read aloud or told stories" (Helgason, 2018, p. 263). It is still widely read in Iceland and there is much literature and art devoted to this subject. Further, the raid has given rise to place names (such as Pirate Bay on Heimaey) and folktales that are passed from generation to generation.

The Mahgreb region of northern Africa from whence the corsairs came has also not escaped the consequences of its slave industry. As the 17th century progressed, Ottoman control of this region became progressively more fragile. "The center's control and oversight of its provincial governors weakened while its

limits imposed on them by the sultan through his ahdnames, and by the early seventeenth century had arrogated to themselves the right to determine which non-Muslim powers were enemy infidels open to attack" (White, 2019, p. 99). By the end of the 18th century, this fractured state led to "the Ottoman military system [falling] behind that of their European rivals" (Askan, 2007, p. 132). It was the beginning of the decline of the Ottoman empire.

Additional consequences to the Ottoman/north African culture arrived via the European renegades and the mark they made on the local economy and customs. "Their wealth and power made many of them dominant figures in the local culture; the slipshod (though often ferocious) Islam they practised and the bastardised lingua franca they spoke to their fellow citizens had an enduring impact on the unique creole communities that developed and flourished for several centuries in the Maghreb. Algiers in particular, with its once very high proportion of European slaves and renegades to Turks and Moors, might indeed be considered an excellent example of a creole society" (Davis, 2001, p. 121).

Regional culture was affected not only in this manner, but the European renegades also married with the native inhabitants and introduced their European genetics into the local gene pools. Similarly, slaves themselves made a mark on their land of captivity. Though the captive men were tightly controlled in terms of sexual activity, the women were often sold as concubines and produced children from these unions. "Well into the late 1700s, observers were still noting how 'the inhabitants of Algiers have a rather white complexion'" (Davis, 2001, p. 120). It is clear that the raids on Iceland and the capture and slavery of these people had long term consequences for the individuals involved, but also for two cultures almost 3000 miles apart.

It is a fascinating event in history and one that has intrigued me greatly since I stumbled upon mention of it while researching for another book I was writing. I vowed to return to it and write a novel based on the event. I personally find the Barbary pirate raids of Iceland incredibly interesting as I love exploring the depths of history and further, I am beguiled by stories of human perseverance. The Icelandic raids have every element of a fantastic narrative and I intend to endeavour to make this event known to a wider audience in the most historically accurate manner I am able. These raids are a tale of suffering, grit, determination, hope, and humanity. From them, we can all learn coping strategies and character traits that can help us in our own trials. These human characteristics are not specific only to this one incident but speak to human nature on the whole.

References

Aksan, Virginia (2007). "Ottoman wars, 1700–1860: An empire besieged." *Pearson Education Ltd*. 130–35.

Clark, G.N. (1944). The Barbary corsairs in the seventeenth century." *The Cambridge Historical Journal.* Vol. 8, No. 1. 22-35.

Davis, Robert C. (2001). Counting European slaves on the Barbary coast." *Past & Present*, no. 172, 87–124. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3600777

Helgason, Þorsteinn. (2018). "The corsairs' longest voyage : The Turkish raid in Iceland 1627." *BRILL*. ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.snhu.edu/lib/snhu-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5331665

Hreinsson, Karl Smári & Nichols, Adam. trans. (2016). "The travels of Reverend Olafur Egilsson: The story of the Barbary corsair raid on Iceland in 1627." *The Catholic University of America Press*.

Löwenheim, Oded. (2007). "Enemies of all mankind?: The Barbary corsairs in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries." Predators and Parasites: Persistent Agents of Transnational Harm and Great Power Authority. *University of Michigan Press*, 80-133. www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.179022.7

White, Joshua M. (2019). "Piracy of the Ottoman mediterranean: Slave laundering and subjecthood. The Making of the Modern Mediterranean: Views from the South," edited by Judith E. Tucker, 1st ed., *University of California Press*, Oakland, California, 95–122. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvh1dt10.10